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Rep. Waxman dishes on Congress' current events

By Aaron Blevins, 5/02/2013

Legislator gives updates on ACA, sequestration

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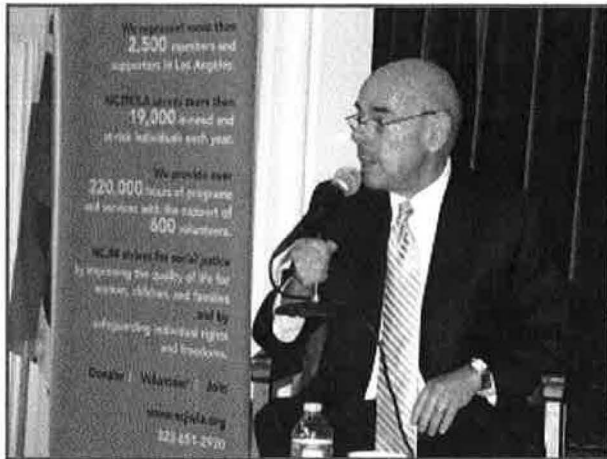
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U.S. Rep. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.) on Tuesday gave a congressional update at the National Council of Jewish Women/Los Angeles (NCJW/LA), saying that he's never been more frustrated as a lawmaker.



U.S. Rep. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.) fields questions during an event at the National Council of Jewish Women/Los Angeles on Tuesday. (photo by Aaron Blevins)

The congressman informed the audience about the failed Senate gun control bill, the provisions of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) that will take effect on Jan. 1 and the looming ramification of the sequester. He also fielded questions.

Following the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi organized a task force on gun violence, and Waxman said he helped make recommendations to prevent future violence.

The task force sought to close the "gun show loophole," which allows individuals to purchase firearms without a background check, while stopping online ammunition sales and regulating large capacity magazines, Waxman said.

"The tragedy in Newtown, Conn., brought home to us what we've seen over and over and over again: People have military weapons," he said. "And there's no excuse for anybody to have a military weapon. ... The only reason to have a military weapon is to go to war, and people with these weapons are going to war against Americans in movie theatres, in schools, in public places."

Waxman said the current law has too many loopholes that circumvent background checks, so legislators were looking to expand those controls. He said it is "inexcusable" to allow criminals or people with mental illnesses that could lead to violence to purchase guns.

The congressman said the Senate has "distorted" the Constitution by requiring that a bill receive 60 votes prior to being voted upon by the entire Senate. Those 60 votes allow legislators to stop the debate on that particular issue; if the debate can't be stopped, the legislators do not vote on the bill, he said. The gun control bill did not come up for a vote.

"To not vote for that bill is, to me, incomprehensible," Waxman said. "But the National Rifle Association is so powerful, and members of Congress are so worried and fearful of people who are a minority group that have intense feelings. They ignore ninety percent of the public opinion that wants

legislation like this.”

He said most of the Congress members who did not allow the bill to go to a vote are up for re-election in “very difficult states.” However, legislators will continue to push for additional gun control laws, such as an assault weapons ban and expanded background checks, Waxman said.

“I don’t accept the verdict of the Senate not getting sixty votes as the end to the issue,” he added. “We’re going to continue that fight.”

Waxman said President Barack Obama had similar issues getting the ACA to a vote, so he asked senators to at least let the bill go to a vote, and then they were free to vote against it.

He said the act resulted from decades of efforts to ensure that every American get can health insurance. Waxman said health insurance became popular in the U.S. after WWII, when there were controls on what employers could pay their workers. Insurance did not count against the limits, so it became a common workplace perk, he said.

Yet, over the years, insurance policies became more and more expensive for employers, and in some cases, an entire group of employees would be disallowed coverage because one employee had a previous medical condition that was boosting the group’s overall cost, Waxman said.

People began buying insurance individually, but some insurance providers would not sell policies to individuals with pre-existing conditions, he said. In some cases, providers considered being a woman to be a pre-existing condition, Waxman said.

“They ought to be able to buy coverage for the same price as anybody else — no discrimination,” the congressman said, adding that some would rescind policies after an individual became ill. “There were a lot of abuses.”

Waxman said Obama and lawmakers sought to end those abuses and make insurance available to Americans in marketplaces, which allow individuals to shop and choose policies.

“We wanted all policies to cover the basic services,” he said, adding that Congress asked the Institute of Medicine to define “basic services.”

The institute determined that basic services included contraception, which bothered some religious people, especially those in the Catholic Church, Waxman said. He said a compromise was made to exclude those working for the church, but not employees working for Catholic schools, as some school employees are non-Catholic.

While some elements of ACA have been implemented, the insurance marketplaces will go live on Jan. 1. Individuals without coverage who are not on Medicare will need to purchase insurance or face tax penalties. Tax breaks will be available for low-income residents.

In California, the marketplace will be called Covered California, and it will be run by the state, Waxman said. He said there will be a large effort to inform people about the new provisions in October.

Next, Waxman moved on to immigration and said he is hopeful that Congress will soon have a comprehensive immigration bill. He said the U.S. needs a national law to prevent people from entering the country as undocumented aliens while providing a pathway to citizenship for those already residing

in the country.

"I'm happy to say this looks like it's going to be a bipartisan bill," Waxman said.

He said sequestration stemmed from an element in last August's budget law that aimed to entice lawmakers to raise the debt ceiling or "destroy" the economy. It called for arbitrary cuts to every spending program.

"To everybody's amazement, it happened," Waxman said. "The Republicans said they'd never let it happen. The Democrats said they'd never let it happen. And it happened."

He said sequestration has adversely impacted the Federal Aviation Administration, the National Institutes of Health and the military.

"We're trying to stop the sequestration, but it is already in effect and it's doing a lot of harm," Waxman said, adding that Obama is trying to use this year's budget to entice Republicans to reach a broad agreement. "I can't understand why we can't get compromise. ... That's the way things should be."

He said some Republicans want spending cuts, but a lot of spending is done through the tax code in the way of tax breaks to companies. Waxman said upper-income individuals also get "special breaks," some of which were eliminated. However, upper-income people still get breaks on investments, he said.

"That should have been figured out so we have a progressive income tax," the congressman said, adding that some Republicans want to cut "entitlement programs" such as Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid. "I hope we can get something done. I have never been more frustrated in my life."



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